

Workers of the World

WASHINGTON

The most striking development inside the Soviet Union in the past year has been the emergence of a genuine labor movement.

Phony union leaders have long represented the Communist apparat against the workers' interests. But after Russian coal miners startled the world by striking for better conditions, the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s Lane Kirkland — who was steadfast for Solidarity during Poland's repression of the union — invited a dozen of their strike committee leaders to the U.S.

A quartet of them came to lunch the other day; I never met a group of more admirable and gutsy Russians. Borakev and Gregenyuk of the Donbass, Vinukov of the Kuzbass, Topalov of Sakhalin — these workers are the sort of intense, industrious idealists who could lead their country out of its permanent depression.

Miners' grievances run deep. Driven by bureaucratic bosses who insist on "the Plan at any price," coal miners have a life expectancy a decade less than that of other Russian men.

Having won recognition by the shock of their peaceful uprising, the strike committees now want help in the machinery of organization: the typewriters, mimeos, and fax machines that turn local outcries into a nationwide movement.

They have unexpected needs as well: for construction equipment, to help a cooperative prosper that employs workers fired for union activity. The man from Sakhalin wants disposable syringes because his co-workers are fearful of AIDS. (The disease has not been reported in his area, but word travels everywhere and a union should respond to the fears of its members.)

What if the fever for freedom spreads to railway workers? What would happen if millions of Russian workers organized to deal with management — the state — and threatened to bring the country to a halt unless the wasteful command economy were abandoned?

My own expectation has been: crackdown. In the name of public order, a new strongman would break the strike with bullets.

That reaction is still the likelihood; Soviet diplomats purvey the line comparing Gorbachev to Lincoln in 1861, unafraid of civil war to save the Union.

But in the light of the revulsion within the Soviet military at the massacre of civilians, a different scenario must be considered.

Intelligence sources say that Red Army marshals have made plain to the Politburo that most soldiers would be unwilling, in any future crisis, to make war on the people. The

rank and file has seen on television how order-followers who shoot into crowds, as in Tbilisi, become pariahs; but soldiers who refuse such orders, as in Bucharest, become heroes.

What does it take to turn armies against higher authority? Answer: the demonstrated willingness of patriots to die. What most motivates a clique in power to refrain from bloodletting? The probability of the failure of such a crackdown — followed by fierce retribution.

Even if Soviet leaders assign troops of different nationalities to control strikers and demonstrators — as Bei-

Leading the way to a loosening.

jing's leaders did — repression could no longer effectively mine the coal and run the railroads.

Recent experience changes current expectation, which in turn shapes a new political reality. Because growing Red Army queasiness puts into question the success of a crackdown, reactionaries are weakened and radicals strengthened.

That may explain why Mr. Gorbachev is traveling to the Baltic now as a reasonable Isaiah rather than a thundering Jeremiah, linking his "personal fate" to a compromise. Moscow's past warnings to secessionists have not intimidated crowds in Lithuania. Gorbachev may be trying to work out de facto Baltic independence within a de jure Soviet federation.

His original plan to revitalize the Communist Party failed. His second plan — to use glasnost to bring about perestroika while preserving central power — has also failed. What now?

Plan C may be to evolve the Soviet Union into a Soviet Confederation — neither as loose as a commonwealth nor as tight as a nation. Nuclear-armed Russia would then be first among equals, using associated Soviet states as a bridge into the world economy.

Am I really writing this? Is such a scenario — in which real labor unions would flourish — remotely possible?

Backlash, reaction, crackdown and state-ordered violence remain the most probable outcome of a statist ideology in its death throes. But long-shots cannot be ignored; exposure to pioneering labor leaders with inquiring minds, hopeful hearts and calloused hands can drive a wedge of optimism into the most determined realist.